DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 217 070 TM 820 323

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TITLE Are We Putting a Loaded Gun in the Hand of a Baby?
PUB DATE Mar 82
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (66th, New York, NY, March 19-23, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; Achievement Tests; Board of Education Role; *Boards of Education; Elementary Secondary Education; Information Utilization; *Teacher Effectiveness

ABSTRACT

The "baby" in the title of this paper refers to local school boards. The author suggests giving school boards more authority to exercise control over schools. In June of each year, the superintendent should present to the Board a report summarizing objective evidence on the achievements in learning of the pupils in the schools. Near the end of the school year, each teacher should present to and discuss with the school principal a report summarizing objective evidence of the effectiveness of that teacher's efforts to facilitate learning among the pupils. Teacher effectiveness should be judged by how well students have learned. The "loaded gun", or test of achievement in learning, provides objective evidence of student progress. The school board is composed of mature adults who are often ethically and intellectually superior. They should be provided with access to information that can contribute greatly to effective management of the programs for which they are responsible. The author appeals to school board members to take the initiative in requiring administrators and teachers to provide them appropriate access to achievement test results. (Author/DWH)

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Are We Putting a Loaded Gun in the Hand of a Baby?*

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The answer is no. We are not putting a loaded gun in the hand of a baby. We are giving groups of mature men and women who are ethically and intellectually superior to most of the rest of us, access to information that can contribute greatly to effective management of the enterprise for which they are responsible, and in which we all have such a major interest. Let me try to justify such a strong statement, such an unqualified assertion.

Many of us are too heavily committed to our own purposes, our own interests and concerns, to donate substantial amounts of our time and energy to public service on a Board of Education. We have too little awareness of the extent to which our welfare, and that of our immediate family depends upon the common welfare of the community. We have too little concern for what Walter Lippman referred to as "The Public Philosophy."

Most men and women who become candidates for school board membership do so from a genuine concern for the public good of the local community. Some may have an ax to grind, but they quickly discover that far more is demanded of them than grinding that particular ax. By and large, members of local school boards are less selfish, more public spirited than the rest of us. In that respect they are ethically superior.

To campaign successfully for election to a school board requires intelligence as well as commitment and energy. One must make statements and answer questions intelligently. One must be well informed about the purposes and prob-

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*Prepared for presentation at the 1982 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York City, March 19-23.

lems of the local school. One who displays ignorance of any of these areas of relevant knowledge is unlikely to be elected by one's fellow citizens to board membership. It is in this respect that they are likely to be intellectually superior to most of the rest of us.

School board members tend to be good, capable people. But we have not given them authority that is sufficient for their responsibilities. Educational developments in recent decades have eroded that authority considerably. One of the reasons for popular discontent with contemporary schooling is that local communities seem to have lost effective control of their schools to the courts, to government bureaucracies, to teacher unions, and to professional educators.

What I want to suggest is a means by which local school boards can exercise more effective control over what goes on in their schools. To make this suggestion as realistic as possible, I invite you to join me on a brief flight of fancy. Imagine yourself to be in a somewhat smaller room than this with a long table around which are seated a number of men and women. The President of the board has just finished introducing a guest who arises and starts to speak. Mr. President and Members of the Board:

I have asked for ten minutes of your time to lay before you a simple means for increasing your control over what goes on in the schools, and for improving the quality of education your children are receiving. I approach this Board directly rather than through the Superintendent, your chief administrative officer, because the Superintendent might not approve the step I am urging you to take. It is a means for holding him and his associates and the teaching staff accountable for the educational results they are obtaining. The decision that needs to be made in this matter is your responsibility, not his. The kind of education provided for the children of this community is ultimately your responsibility. He is your agent in this matter.

The means I have to suggest for improving instruction in this community can be embodied in two simple resolutions.

1. Resolved, that in June of each year the Superintendent shall present to the board a report summarizing objective evidence on the achievements in learning of pupils in the schools.

2. Resolved, that near the end of each school year each teacher shall present to and discuss with the school principal a report summarizing objective evidence of the effectiveness of that teacher's efforts to facilitate learning among the pupils.

After sufficient reflection and discussion you may wish to consider these two resolutions for adoption.

Let me point out several implications of the actions called for by these resolutions. One is that the primary purpose of schooling is to produce learning. To most people that proposition seems eminently reasonable. It accords well with what they see going on in schools, and what they think ought to go on. There are, however, a few who would disagree. To them the process is more important than the product. Schools are for living, they say. Learning will occur, of course, but it is incidental to the living. It need not be, indeed should not be, made the focus of any special attention or concern. If children are busy and happy in school, all is well, they say, no matter how little the children may be learning.

In schools where achievement in learning is regarded as unimportant, there is obviously no point in taking much trouble to obtain evidence of it. The number of such schools, fortunately, appears to be quite small.

A second implication of these two resolutions is that it is possible to obtain objective evidence of pupil achievements in learning. The evidence must be objective if it is to have general validity and acceptability. It must be verifiable. Subjective evidence, the unique perception of a particular observer, can not be verified. It has no general validity or acceptability.

The experience of thousands of teachers for hundreds of years has demon-

strated that it is possible to obtain objective evidence of pupil achievements in learning. One common way of doing this is to give the pupils a written test. Such tests are not the only source of objective evidence, but they are frequently the best and most convenient source. But note that the resolutions proposed here do not require the use of objective tests or even of written tests. Whatever source of objective evidence the teachers and school administrators wish to use can be used. Of course the evidence must be shown to be relevant and reliable.

The main thing that is learned in schools and colleges is useful verbal knowledge. As the term is used here, knowledge is a very broad concept. It includes understanding as well as information. It includes knowing how as well as knowing that. Defined in those terms, knowledge is a very powerful tool for productive thinking, for critical thinking, for problem solving. There is no mental ability or skill that does not depend on knowledge of how to do something. Acquisition of that kind of knowledge is clearly the chief business of the students in any school. That kind of knowledge can be tested. It is almost all that needs to be tested to obtain evidence of the effectiveness of a school's program of instruction or of a teacher's teaching.

A third implication is that schools should be judged by the results they produce rather than by the processes they employ. Surely this is sensible. But educators sometimes fall in love with particular methods which they use and admire. They urge others to follow their example, almost without regard for the effectiveness of those methods in facilitating learning. The history of education is full of examples of unique methods of instruction that have been promoted vigorously, gained wide usage, and then fallen into disuse, as their limitations and undesirable side effects became apparent. No single method is likely to give best results for all teachers of all subjects in all instructional settings. The effectiveness of a school or of a teacher should be judged by how well their pupils have learned, not by how they go about the job of teaching them.

A fourth implication is that the task of providing the evidence of pupil achievement in learning should be assigned to the teachers and administrators who were responsible for developing it. They know better than anyone else the intended goals for achievement. They are in the most favorable position to assess the extent to which the goals have been reached. In their hands, the testing can be related most closely and directly to the teaching. If the evidence reveals deficiencies in achievement, they will be in the best position to act to correct the deficiencies. The emphasis in the evaluation will be on self-evaluation.

These are reasons why teachers and administrators should provide evidence of pupil achievement in learning. The next question is, can they? Some, no doubt, can do the job quite satisfactorily. Others will need help. If the resolutions are passed, the school may wish to organize some workshops on the problem. Reports from teachers the first year may leave much to be desired. Those for the second year should be better. Teachers and administrators can learn from their own mistakes, and from each other. It would be a mistake to delay application of the resolution until after the teachers have "learned how to do" what is required. The best way to learn how to do a job of this kind is to begin to do it.

Some teachers and administrators may regard the provision of evidence of pupil achievement in learning as an extra burden, extraneous to their main job, and unnecessary. It is not. It is an essential element in that job. Schools that consistently monitor pupil learning in this way are certain to produce more learning than schools that do not.

A fifth implication is that school board members are competent to understand and to evaluate the reports of pupil achievements in learning that are submitted to them. The essential facts about amounts of learning among individuals or in a group are not difficult to describe. They can, of course, be

obscured or buried under technicalities. Some professional educators like to act as if what they know about learning is too complex and mysterious for ordinary mortals to understand. Trust me, they say, but don't expect me to explain. Such educators, it is reasonable to suggest, make very poor teachers.

The provision of reports that are concise, clear and informative is the responsibility of those who prepare them. What they write ought to be intelligible to the ordinary citizen. If it is, their reports should present no problems to school board members.

Each board member will want to read the report from the Superintendent. Each will want to read reports from some of the teachers. This will take time, but probably less time than the board members spend annually on the school's financial budget. Does it not seem reasonable to spend at least as much time in studying what the schools are producing in the way of learning as in studying how much money should be spent on the process?

A sixth implication is that obtaining and reporting evidence of achievement in learning will result in an increase in the amount of learning. The evidence reported can serve as a reward for the effort required to learn. Unless attention is paid to achievements in learning, the motivation of pupils, teachers and administrators to put forth extra efforts to learn is likely to be low. Without extra efforts the amount of learning may be small.

Some believe that the most effective use of tests in education is to diagnose learning difficulties, to help teachers to make better instructional decisions. Tests should be used during instruction, they believe, to facilitate learning, not after instruction to determine how effective it has been. There is no reason, of course, why tests can not be used both ways, for instruction as well as for assessment. But there is good reason to believe that tests used for assessment are also powerful facilitators of learning.

Much human behavior is purposeful, goal directed behavior. Final tests and

other indicators of achievement in learning provide the goals for efforts to learn. It seems reasonable to believe that most pupils learn less than they might not because of undiagnosed learning difficulties or because of inappropriate instructional decisions made by their teachers, but because they have not studied hard enough. The same can be said of some teachers and school administrators. They have not concentrated enough of their time and energy and abilities on the facilitation of pupil learning. Awareness that the success of efforts to learn is to be reported to members of the school board is likely to increase those efforts substantially. This is likely to result in substantial increases in the amount of learning.

The purpose of the resolutions I have suggested is to establish procedures for systematic accounting of pupil achievements in learning. The resolutions do not prescribe any particular means of accounting, only that an accounting be given. Hence if the resolutions are opposed it can not be on the ground that inappropriate means of accounting have been proposed. It must be that the accounting itself is regarded as unnecessary, undesirable, or impossible. But if any of those things were to be true, there would be no reason for any of us to be concerned with quality in education, as many of us are. The pursuit of excellence in education would be futile. I do not think that it is futile. I hope you do not think so either.

Accounting for pupil achievements in learning will be an unfamiliar, troublesome task for many teachers and school administrators. It will take time and thought. It may result in further criticism of the schools. Hence it is unlikely that many teachers or school administrators will welcome or support the accounting. But it is difficult to think of any innovation in education that is likely to do more to improve the effectiveness of your schools.

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Board of Education, the responsibility is yours. School administrators and school teachers are subject to your direction. If

you do not do what can be done to improve the effectiveness of instruction in your schools, a major share of the responsibility for their shortcomings rests upon you.

You may not be used to taking initiatives of this kind. Your customary role may be to react to proposals from school administrators or pressures from the community rather than to act on your own initiative to improve achievements in learning in this district. Do not turn aside from this responsibility. The need is urgent. The means are available. I urge you to act promptly on the proposed resolutions.